TRADITIONAL INDIAN THEATRE AND KABUKI

A Passage Toward A Total Theatre

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Traditional Indian Theatre like[1] *Kcotiyattam, Kathakali, Yakshagana, Jatra* etc., belonging to different regions of India, is related to village (folk) community and classical sanskrit theatre to the urban sophistication. But both these theatre forms are interrelated with each other—both affecting and continue to affect one another. At another level the regional forms of Traditional Indian Theatre have a clear pattern of interaction among them where themes, content and forms are developed in a framework of continual communication. As a result the first available book on Indian dramaturgy by Bharata (2nd Cen. B.C.-2nd Cen A.D.) recognised the emergence of the regional variants in the concept of the *Pravrittis.* These theatrical forms are categorized by later theoreticians as *desi* forms against the classical concept of *margi* forms. Both these forms must be seen in a relationship of co-existence where the theatrical spectacle is conceived as a total amalgam of spoken words, music, pantomime, costumes, make-up, decor, and finally the inner states of being. Though this conception results in the acceptance of the stylized conventions (*natyadharmi*) more than the naturalis ic (*lokadharmi*) conventions of theatre[2] yet the Traditional Indian Theatre has always remained a vehicle of expression of protest, dissent and reform and thereby expressed the *lokadharmi* conventions with equal gusto and fervour. In fact the stylized and realistic conventions are not in counter opposition but remain in a relationship of co-existence in the Traditional Indian Theatre and thereby induce at one level emotional enjoyment and on another level stimulate rational judgement.

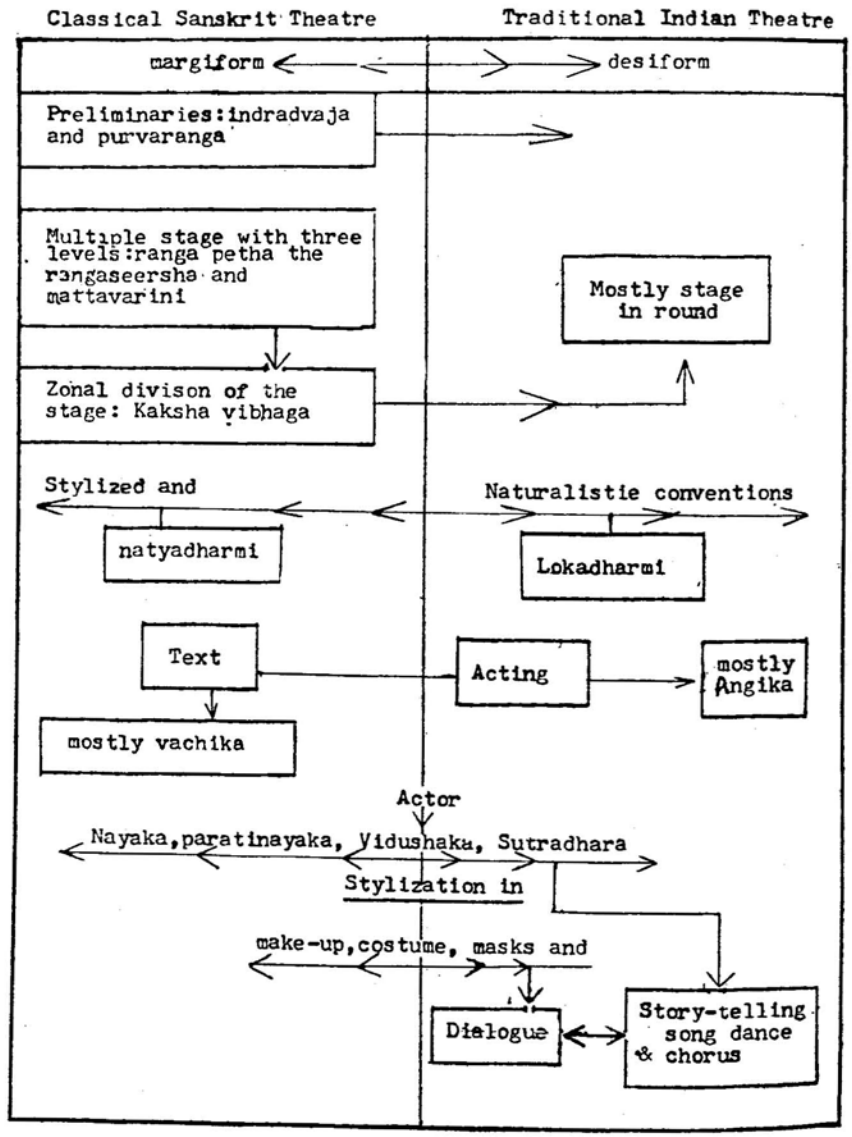
The classical sanskrit theatre form has influenced the structures and conventions of Traditional Indian Theatre. The classical convention of preliminaries (*indradhvaja* and *purvaranga*) is an essential feature of traditional theatre. It has also inherited many of the classical conventions like the divison of the play into plots and subplots, their use of *sandhis* (spans of the plot i.e. *itivritta*) which provide a means to understand the harmony

of composition of a particular play. Intimately connected with the *sandhis* is the concept of *rasa* (theatric experience). Bharata said that a dramatist should apply the *sandhyangas* in such a way that they evoke the proper aesthetic response, and *rasa* should be discussed after or along with the *sandhis*.[3] As, in Bharat's own words, theatre is a representation of the emotional states of the three worlds,[4] its aim is not directly to convey moral or spiritual truths, but to evoke moods.[5] The classical hero-heroine types as the *nayaka* and the anti-heroes, are utilised in traditional theatre. The all important role of the *sutradhara* appears in traditional theatre as the *ranga*, the *bhagavata*, the *vyas*, the *adhikari*, or the *swami*. The clown, the counter part of the classical *Vidushaka* is the darling of the traditional theatre. Although the highly organised division of space of the sanskrit stage is lost to many of these forms in their contemporary manifestations, they still adhere to some rough and ready conventions of the *kakshavibhaga* (zonal divisions) of the sanskrit stage.[6] Besides, the traditional Indian theatre employs music, dance, stylized gesticulation pattern (*abhinaya*), verse dialogue, exaggerated make-up, and masks with the same lavishness as the classical theatre. Because of this influence there is an identifiable thematic unity among the various traditional theatrical manifestations spread out in various regions of India. The classical Indian Theatre grew out of pageants, rituals, mimes and ancient folk forms and can be dated back to 3rd century B.C. But the Traditional Indian Theatre mostly prevalent in rural areas today is only four to six hundred years old.[7] The interaction and independent characteristics can be seen in the diagram on the following page.

Kabuki, like Traditional Indian Theatre came into flower in the 17th century. It can be termed as the popular live drama of Japan to distinguish it from the puppet drama or *Joruri* and from the *Noh* play, which from its fixed repertory and partial simplicity might well be called the classical drama of Japan. Like Indian Traditional Theatre, Kabuki has taken many of its subjects and conventions from the classical theatre (*Noh*) of course in a modified form. Both these theatres have their own complex history, their own traditional audience and their own social role but certain underlying theatric conventions and aesthetic factors make comparisons between them of the greatest interest. This paper deals with three aspects of these two theatres: stylization, participation and total theatre.

Traditional Indian Theatre as in all traditional art forms of ancient lands has had the common feature of close association with religious beliefs and rites. Common to Traditional Indian Theatre, Kabuki has a basis in Indian religion. Just as in the Japanese statues of Buddha one can detect important Indian elements, one can do the same in the general structure and even some of the details of Noh and Kabuki.[8] Rooted to the soil, Traditional Indian Theatre has been vital and vigorous enough to defy temporal or cultural conquests. For material it drew upon the inexhaustible storehouse of stories and legends, history and philosophy, religion and myths, hagiology and

Diagram



demonology provided by the two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and by the Puranas.[9] Such stories are moralistic in outlook and often portray the victory of good over evil. Kabuki has also to some extent a didactic purpose. It is linked with the desire to instruct the audience in good manners and good conduct, be it how to visit a brothel in elegant style, or how a warrior's wife should crush insolence or defend her young mistress

from villainy, or the proper way of exacting revenge. For this purpose a certain amount of idealism has necessarily intruded in it.[10] Most of our traditional theatre—Indian or Kabuki—lean heavily on legendary lore and present the story through the medium of music, dance and literature in a very stylized way. One can find in them a very complex relationship between the sung words and dramatic expression, gestures and facial expressions and dancing.

Bharata in his Natyashastra explained that theatre is a plaything (*Kridaniyakam*)[11]—a kind of diversion from the day-to-day drudgery of life so it involves the conventions of stylization (*natyadharmita*)[12] more than the conventions of the representational world (*lokadharmita*)[13]. The main catchword is that you are not watching life but only a theatre. Traditional Indian Theatre through the presentational form (stylized acting, song, poetry, make-up etc.) creates on the stage the reality of the theatric universe. The primary intention is to entertain and by that to arouse a personal response (*rasa*) in the mind of the spectator. It is precisely the stylization that characterizes traditional forms of Indian theatre. *Kootiyattam* performance begins and ends with elaborate rituals like playing of the *mizhavu* drums or *kuzhitala* cymbals, lighting of the bell-metal oil lamp with two wicks facing the actor and one facing the audience, *arrannutali* or the cleaning of the stage by sprinkling with water, narration of the story (*nambyarute tamil*) by the Nambyar *Sutradhara* (story teller) or the introductory *purappad* which is interpretative movements of the first three lines of the first verse of the drama by various actors, *nirvahana* or the pantomime presentation of the story by the dancer/actor with the help of various types of *abhinaya* (acting) which included the *angika abhinaya* of using of eyes and eyebrows, facial muscles, torso and hands and transformation of speech into singing and recitation done by the Nanyar women singers. This kind of communication technique based on the word sound movement and symbolic gesticulation is a class in itself. For example, in the first act of *Subhadradhananjaya,* Arjuna saves the heroine without knowing who she is. The actor who plays Arjuna needs four hours to explain this through gestures. He gazes at Subhadra, describes her, beginning with the hair, he indicates the meaning through hand gesture and recites it in the *raga* (tune) called *Arttan.* Then he goes into the word *me manasam shittilayanti* and again expounds it in detail till he comes to *subhadra muddritam,* when he assumes the posture of Subhadra and suggests how she enters his heart. Then he enacts a story to show how her attendants adorn her body from the combing of her hair to the tying of the anklets round her feet. But something has been forgotten, applying the collyrium to the eyes. The chakyar actor becomes the heroine, her attendant and even Arjuna himself.[14] The form, thus, is full of interpretative movements, and the greatness of an actor lies in the capacity for multiple interpretation of the word with the help of the highly developed and stylized technique of hand gestures (*hastabhinaya*), facial gestures (*mukhabhinaya*), as also the movement

of the eyes (*netrabhinaya*). *Kata* style of acting in Kabuki is also a consummated style of acting or expression. The Kabuki and also the *Kathakali* actors have a large vocabulary of eye, eyebrow and lip movements to show fear, worry, courage, anger, sorrow and the whole range of emotions. Exaggerated pose in Kabuki is called *Miye* which is intended to create a strong impression of the action almost like 'close up' used in movies.[15] The pose is as necessary a part of Kabuki as phrasing is in music. At intervals the actors momentarily pause in position and all motion on the stage is arrested.[16] Frozen appearances (*seridashi*) and pantomimic puppet gesticulations are other varieties of acting. Acting as a whole in Kabuki is noteworthy for its series of exaggerated, dancelike, expansive, and carefully measured gestures and movements.[17] Every gesture is directed by the aesthetic principles of economy, suggestiveness, grace and intensity. All these elements indicate how much importance is given to stylized techniques in these theatres. Stylization does not mean divorced from reality, but simply approaching reailty through a different perspective, choosing what is most significant, meaningful, pleasing or dramatically effective.[18] A vast spectrum of stylization can be seen throughout the various forms of Traditional Indian Theatre. The speech of the characters of *Yakshagana* is very much stylized where each one helps the conversation by repeating the last word of the other in a sort of carry-forward or by breaking a long monologue by another with 'aha' 'aho', and 'hao' expressing affirmation. The Kabuki manner of speaking the lines is more like singing. The rhythmic dialogue or monologue is always recited to the accompaniment of music. Kabuki is musical if not operatic. The sound of music colours variously the performance of a Kabuki play. The *Gidayu Joruri* (song narration) like the chorus of the greek drama sings of the thoughts and feelings of the dramatic personnel and keeps up the emotional tone of the play. The action is like dancing and all the other exaggerations of presentation have been a decisive factor in the stylization of this theatre form. The parallel flow of the two streams of poetic imagery of *Kathakali*, one composed of word and the other of dance images, in the deep stage surrounded in black drapes where the dancers emerge into the light from mysterious darkness and recede into it again is characteristically stylized to give an effect that life emerges from the dark unknown void and again recedes into it. The climatic begining of Jatra, the 'woman' played by man actor and 'singing on behalf' by *Juri* (a set of singers who sing on behalf of the actors in Jatra) are all stylized techniques to prove that the natural thing is not the natural thing on the stage. If *Noh* shows a ghost on the stage, Kabuki, presumably, does not. Kabuki, with the wider choreographic range, makes it possible for a great artist like Utaemon to suggest very vividly what he sees as does a great kathakali dancer,[19] Like the *Jatra* 'woman' played by man or the best *Bhavai* actors who specialize in female roles, the *onnagata* of Kabuki proves that when a man acts as a woman, it is art.

The other examples of stylization in Kabuki are the use of colourful costumes and bold make-ups. By using the technique of *Hikkinuki*, characters

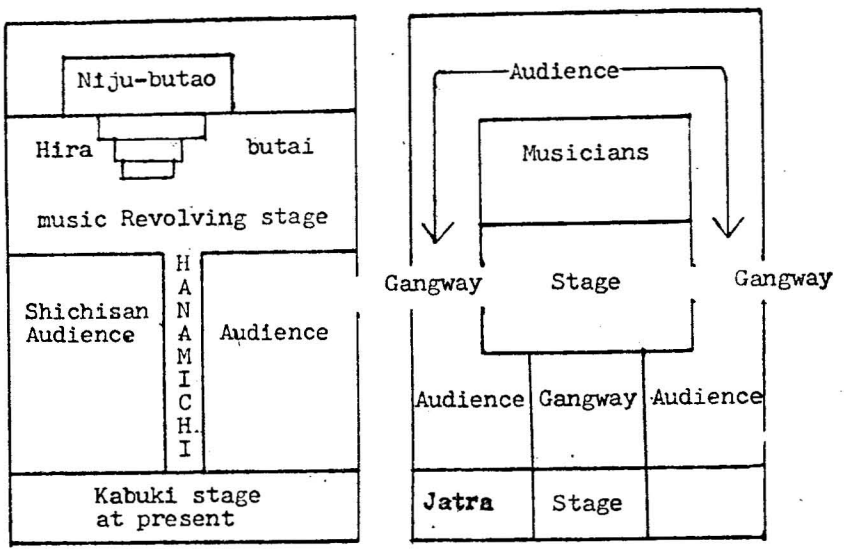
appear in a new costume at the climactic moment. In *Ogiya Kumagai* a scene takes place where Atsumori disguised as a girl suddenly throws off his outer clothing and wig, and reveals himself as a man in full armor. Stylized beauty is added by use of wigs. Make up is used to make the face appear bigger. It is an important part of the colour aspect of the spectacle. The face of a good or high ranking man is painted chalkwhite. The evil is painted in varying degrees of red. To express inner qualities of a more complex nature, the *Kumadori* make-ups of *aragota* are used. It is to show the exaggeration of the face by lines of indigo, bluish black, purple, gold etc. These lines are governed broadly by the following principles: for strength, the lines curve upward; for weakness, villainy or humour the lines slant downwards. The costumes and make-ups in *Yakshagana* and *Kathakali* are designed and made to give an oversize impression. Kings and chiefs have exaggerated moustaches and eyebrows and a faint reddish paint over their faces. The *mundasu* (a giant turban), u-shaped mark with a red flame in the centre of the forehead, conch-shell design above the nose and between the eye brows and the left and right corners of the eyes with a fine red outline is the make-up of the *Yakshagana* hero. He wears a jet-black moustache and various type of ornaments. In *Therukoothu* villains are painted red with white and black dots. In *Yakshagana* it is red and green. The *Kathakali* and *Kutiyattam* follow the symbolism of red denoting evil and also heroism. The demons even wear big red painted moustaches. The principle of using make-up is to transform the individual face to a character type are common to Kabuki and chinese opera form of theatres. These highly stylized technique of make-up is a deliberate attempt not to achieve dis-similitude with life but to idealize life with greater nobility and strength. The reality to which these make-up and costumes correspond is not photographic but interior, symbolic and theatrical. By representing reality to its extremes a theatrical transposition is created rather than a realistic imitation. But because of stylization, Kabuki and Indian Traditional Theatre are non-illusionistic and uncompromisingly theatrical form[20] yet never have these forms discarded reality however formlessly exaggerated. People of Indian Traditional Theatre and Kabuki know very well that art is something that lies in the slender margin between the real and the unreal,[21] so the reality is never lost and the connection with life is never severed. From the world of stylized ideality of gods, kings and *brahmins*, the *vidushaka* or clown of *kootiyattam*, or konangi of *Bhagavatamela* and *Yakshagana* or komali of *Terukoothu* or Joothan Mian of *Bhavai* bring theatre at once near to the people in time here and now. They talk of social protest, dissent and bitter sarcasm. Joothan Mian boasts and lies but in the mask of untruth he seeks the truth. In contrast to the kinetic and pantomime technique, vidushaka uses the spoken word (*vachikabhinaya*) and is at liberty to move freely on two planes: one involving the eternal and the other the present. Ayame has something like this in his mind when he says that *Shosagoto* is the flower of Kabuki and *Jigei* is the fruit.[22] The distinction between flower and fruit is taken as that between the flowering of the

imagination i.e. non-realistic treatment, and realism. In other words Ayame wants to prove that Kabuki is both idealization and reality. Here in these two forms true stylization is not grafted from the outside; it grows within so it becomes a part of reality where even emotions can be communicated through it. It does not have western artificiality and decorative exteriorization which can at the most move us to laughter. Indian and Japanese theatrical stylization gives us a bigger-than-life concept of the theatre and a heightened vision of reality. It is rooted in reality but not limited by it. It is an extension of reality not so much to create a *distance* so that the spectators may analyse as to entertain.[23] Ofcourse stylization creates an aesthetic *distance* also (Brechtian Verfremdung) and at the same time induces an emotional sensitivity. We are aware and unaware at the same time and this double experience is essential to the sense of profound joy that arises from watching these theatres.

Kabuki and Traditional Indian Theatre are participative theatre. *Kootiyattam* and *Yakshagana* run from four to five nights even more, of course with gaps at daytime. *Jatra* and *Bhavai* have nightlong performances. One can attend Kabuki from late morning till late night. Obviously such lengthy performances are possible because of the relaxed attitude of the audience who consider theatre a place to live, not a place to sit. The stage and its setting and the music (chorus) of Kabuki are set from the point of view of audience participation. These theatres are always a cooperative product of the performers and the audience. It depends on the cooperation and sympathy of the audience. But unlike Traditional Indian Theatre, Kabuki is an art where decor, changes of elaborate sets, lighting and all the techniques of the proscenium theatre are all important. In fact in the course of its development, Kabuki has adopted the western style of proscenium stage but the music is in full view in the left corner of the stage, the *gidayu* music pouring out from behind the blinded window of an elevated structure in the right hand corner of the stage and on top of it *hana-michi,* a long narrow platform from stage to back of the auditorium in the left at the level of the seated spectator's shoulder in a way abolish the 'proscenium' without theoretically abolishing it. The advantage of the *hana-michi* with its people seemingly rising out of the audience and disappearing into it is that the dramatic illusion is increased.

Traditional Indian Theatre has a central staging or it is theatre in the round. Theatre in the round means where the audience completely surrounds the action on all sides or atleast on three sides and fully participates in the theatre as in *Bhavai, Kathakali, Yakshagana* and *Jatra.* The *Kathakali* and *Bhavai* are performed in the open but at the same ground level as the audience. *Kootiyattam, Yakshagana* and *Jatra* are performed on raised round, rectangular or square platforms. *Jatra and Yakshagana* are performed in open air but *Kootiyattam* stage is built in a large auditorium. Unlike Kabuki there is hardly any decor or setting to be found on the stage.

In *Kootiyattam* and *Yakshagana* a curtain is brought in by two persons at the time of the first entry of the main characters. The stage is decorated with palm and plantain leaves. There are one or two stools or chairs used as props. Infact Kabuki is a citybased popular theatre having a fusion of art and technology. Traditional Indian Theatre is a mass and village based theatre. It is not folk because it needs long years of training involving body technique, dance and music. In various forms of this theatre different type of gangways (*hanamichi*) connect the stage with the greenroom (*nepathya* or *gakuya*). But it is never used for acting as in Kabuki. In Jatra the actor enters the gangway on the run and disappears in the same way, sometimes the exit of an actor is overlapped by the entry of another actor who immediately becomes engaged in action on the stage and by this gives an idea of continuity. In *Bhavai* all entries to the *paudh* (stage) are by a gangway that runs through the crowded audience. As a result one does not feel a witness to the programme but a part of it. In Kabuki the raised platform square in the centre of the stage (*niju-butai*), its surrounding area (*hira-butai*) and the *hana-michi* particularly *shichi-san*, a spot three-tenths of the distance from the main stage, all afford space where the same theme is enacted in various ways at the same time at three levels. It also affords the double awareness (illusion and non-illusion) which is a part so vital for these kinds of theatre. This awareness comes not by interchanging the actor and the audience levels but by bringing them into an intimate contact. The mysteries of this kind of contact through participation become meaningful to the spectators in an intellectualized way which give pleasure to them. It is the peculiar magic of theatrical representation that it compels in the audience a form of identification with the represented emotions that is neither other-directed (*paragata*) nor entirely directed towards oneself (*swagata*). Thus the mind is enabled to contemplate the situation at once with involvement and detachment. Involvement develops an emotive situation and detachment leads the audience to search for meaning (knowledge). In Indian poetics meaning (knowledge) is not completely different from pleasure. They both result from the same cause—the causes and consequences of an emotive situation. Delight itself is theatre's way of knowing, and hence it is said that *natya* (theatre) itself is *veda* (knowledge)[24]. A Kabuki performance makes significant contribution in the same way to the four primary appetities: emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual: The Kabuki stage and the Jatra (one of the forms of the Traditional Indian Theatre) stage look some what like the figure given on the following page.



The dynamics of these theatres are to create emotional knowledge. These theatres believe that the 'world is a stage' and 'life is a dream' and thereby combine realism and unreality or involvement and detachment or illusion and non-illusion in intimate conjunction. They are total theatre in the sense Jean-Louis Barrault has used this concept where theatre is a director's medium, using the text only as one relatively minor part of an overall theatrical experience of lights, music, movement of all sorts, sets and costumes.[27] Both these theatres are less textual and more theatrical. Because of fixed repertoire of several plays audience of Kabuki and Indian Traditional Theatre is more interested in other paraphernalia (particularly acting and music) than the story or to be more precise to the integrated experience of the total resources offered by the theatre. In Indian and Japanese terms total theatre means that it should appeal to many levels in each spectator, and to all levels within a given society. Both these theatres are popular theatre and true theare of the people. In India even the urban man has a socio-cultural base in the village so Traditional Indian Theatre is popular with all. Kabuki also belongs to common man, merchant class, samurai and the nobility as well. These theatres communicate also at least on two planes: one involving the eternal or the timelessness and the other the present or the flux and thereby create a total theatre. Both these theatres entertain, induce an emotioal sensitivity and stimulate rational judgement. They imbibe in the spectator a gigantic vision of the combined effect of the immanent and the transcendant and create a sublime beauty.[28] The spectator comes out of these theatres as if he had been in a hypnotic trance, in a dream. It has been like a dream which permits us to sleep and awaken again refreshed, recuperated and ready to face a reality much less acceptable and satisfying than the Kabuki or the *Jatra* or the *Yakshagana* story.

NOTES

1. There are many Indian theatre forms which cannot be described only as 'folk' or 'classical' forms. In fact forms like *Kootiyattam*, *Kathakali*, *Yakshagana*, *Jatra* have a classical (*margi*) structure with regional (*desi*) variations having folk as well as urban patronage. These theatre forms are termed as Traditional Indian Theatre by scholars like Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, see, Traditional Indian Theatre, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1980.

2. See, Bharata's Natyashastra (Ed. M. Ramakrishna Kavi), Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1956, Vol I p, 120.

3. See, Maria Christopher Byrski, 'Can Sanskrit Drama tell us anything more?' Educational Theatre Journal, 27, 4 (Dec. 1975), 445-452.

4. Natyashastra, 1.107.

5. 'Harshadi' Natyashastra, Vi. 32, Prose section.

6. Kapila Vatsyayan, Traditional Indian Theatre, p. 13.

7. Balwant Gargi in his book 'Folk Theatre of India', University of Washington Press, 1966, makes a distinction between the folk and the classical and does not use the term Traditional Indian Theatre. He, of course, agrees that these two forms are not antitheses of each other, 'they co-exist; they borrow and lend'. He further says that folk art always precedes classical but strangely enough fixes the time of folk theatre to 13th to 15th century A.D. Infact replacement of sanskrit theatre (it was almost banned by the muslim rulers) into the growing Traditional Indian Theatre in the rural areas took place during that time. In this way the tradition flowed into various regional forms and provided a unity in the diverse theatrical manifestations of different regions.

8. G. Venkatachalam, The Dance Arts of South-East Asia, Sangeet Natak 4.

9. See, Kironmoy Raha, Bengali Theatre, National Book Trust, N. Delhi, p. 4.

10. Dust in the Ears, XVIII, p. 85.

11. Natyashastra, I. 11.

12. Ibid, VI. 24

13. Ibid.

14. See, K. Kunjunni Raja, 'Kootiyattam' The sacred and the secular in India's Performing Arts (Ed. V. Subramantam), New Delhi, 1980, 145-46.

15. See, Yonezo Hamamura, Takashi Sugawara etc., Kabuki, Toyko, 1956.

16. Faubion Bowers, Japanese Theatre, London, 1951, p. 72.

17. Ibid.

18. See, Leonard C. Pronko, Theatre East and West, University of California Press, London, 1967, p. 183.

19. Fernau Hall, Noh, Kabuki, Kathakali, Sangeet Natak 7, Jan-March 1968.

20. Earle Ernst, Kabuki Theatre, New York, 1956, p. ix.

21. Said by Chikamatsu, see, 'Chikamatsu on the Art of the Puppet Stage', in Donald Keene, Ed., Anthology of Japanese Literature, Tokyo, 1963, I, 388.

22. Dust in the Ears, XIV, P. 88.

23. Bharata says that theatre is a plaything (kridaniyakam), Natyashastra, I. 11. Indian Traditional Theatre has the same view about theatre.

24. See, Abhinava Gupta, Dhvanyaloka Lochana, Ed. Jagannatha Pathak, Varanasi, 1965, p. 369.

25. Leonard C. Pronko, Theatre East and West, p. 183-84.

26. Lionel Abel accepts these as two basic postulates on which his metatheatre is based, Metatheatre: A new view of dramatic form, New York, 1963, p. 105.

27. John Russell Taylor, A dictionary of the theatre, Penguin, 1976, p. 275.

28. See, Yonezo Hamamura, 'The Aesthetics of the Kabuki', Kabuki, Tokyo, 1956.

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